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Ready to Move Along

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Ready to Move Along

The Sacralization of Disembedding in the New Age Movement and the Alternative Circuit in Buenos Aires

Maria Julia Carozzi

- 1 In her introduction to a *Social Compass* thematic issue on the New Age movement, Hildegard Van Hove (1999a) pleaded sociologists of religion to no longer ignore this complex phenomenon that challenges many of our conceptual frames. In effect, its organization is more adequately described as a -segmented, polycentric and integrated- network (York 1999), which traveling participants turn into a circuit (Magnani, 1999), than as a church or sect¹. The multiple roads of this circuit seem to break through the barriers that once clearly distinguished religions from therapeutic procedures and body movement techniques. Under the common objective of spiritual transformation, it blends practices and beliefs stemming from a number of Oriental religious traditions, European Esotericism, Theosophy and Native American Shamanism with massage techniques, psychotherapeutic methods and alternative body movement systems recently developed in Europe and the United States of America. Workshops, seminars and therapies spreading the New Age message are limited in duration and immediately paid for by participants, thus leading some authors to identify the phenomenon with the emergence of a spiritual marketplace (Van Hove, 1999b).
- 2 Nevertheless, as Heelas (1996) has pointed out, under the seemingly extreme variability in beliefs and practices, a number of common understandings and practical beliefs allow us to analyze the phenomenon as a movement with a distinctive frame (Snow and Benford, 1988 ; Carozzi, 2000). This frame includes the claim that human beings have a sacred and perfect inner core -alternatively named « inner spirituality », « God within », the « Goddess within », « Center », « Inner Voice », « Higher Self », « Inner Guide », « Inner Teacher », etc.- that wisely guides each individual in her or his own spiritual path choices. This perfect inner essence is assumed to be harmonically connected to a sacred and spiritual Whole – alternatively named as « God », « Goddess », « Cosmic Energy », « Nature », « Mother Earth », etc. Active travelers in the alternative circuit generally believe that the knowledge and expression of each individual's inner spirituality, will produce a positive radical transformation involving Humanity as a whole. Anticipation of

a universal positive transformation is sometimes explicitly expressed in millenarian terms as the arrival of a New Age or the Age of Aquarius. This expectation gave the movement its internally disputed name.

- 3 The practical and verbal construction throughout the alternative circuit of the belief in a perfect spiritual core within the individual assumed to be harmonically connected to a similarly perfect and sacred totality, coupled with millennial expectations, support the analysis of the New Age as a religious movement -albeit a truly innovative one. And, in fact, although some researchers working on new social movements include it as one of them (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield, 1994), the New Age has been most frequently studied from sociological, anthropological and history of religion perspectives (see, for example, Albanese, 1990 ; Amaral, 1999 ; Bowman, 1999 ; Heelas, 1996 ; Lewis and Melton, 1992 ; Melton, 1992b ; Míguez, 2000 ; Van Hove, 1999b ; York, 1999).
- 4 Míguez (2000) has suggested that both Pentecostalism and the New Age Movement constitute the spiritual correlate to modern Western disembedding processes (Giddens, 1997, 2001), in the first case among popular strata of the population, in the second one among higher -middle- class urban dwellers. Following Giddens, the author considers that an essential element of the nature and impact of modern institutions resides in the « lifting out » of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space. This « lifting out » is what both authors mean by disembedding. According to Míguez (2000) the massive success Pentecostalism enjoys among the poorest dwellers of Buenos Aires and the spread of New Age practices amongst the middle classes, had a central impact on the religious modernization of the city's population. This is due to the fact that both movements sacralize the relation individual/God or individual/Sacred Cosmos denying, at the same time, the sacral nature bestowed upon communal bonds by Catholicism.
- 5 His hypothesis seems especially interesting because New Age discourses and alternative circuit practices bestow crucial importance on face-to-face and body-to-body encounters for attaining personal development and spiritual evolution. Taking into account the centrality that group workshops, therapies involving body contact, massages and encounters enjoy in the network, the idea that participation in it contributes to disembedding individuals from immediate social connections seems paradoxical at first view. I will argue that the type of disembedding the alternative circuit contributes to legitimate and sacralize is not mainly produced through replacement of face-to-face relations by mediated ones but through legitimating ephemeral contact with short-lived groups and ever-changing individuals. I will claim that the key to the New Age movement and alternative circuit disembedding lies in the sacralization of ephemeral contact with continuously renewed peers, frequently across national borders, and on the parallel desacralization of permanent social relationships.
- 6 If this is the case, we would be witnessing a significant transformation in the Buenos Aires middle-class culture, introduced by the local expansion of a transnational movement, since permanent relationships have enjoyed almost undisputed legitimacy, even among people who are not practicing Catholics. To cite just a few examples, let's remember that tango lyrics sing the praises of permanent relationships with mothers and friends condemning as a betrayal any attempt to forget or separate from them (Archetti, 1999 : 148). Besides, it seems to be the case that a number of global and transnational movements have been transformed in Buenos Aires to adapt to this kind of permanent face-to-face bonds. Most temples of Afro-Brazilian religions -another religious movement

of relatively recent growth in the city- are sustained by active inner circles gathering people united by kinship, friendship or neighborhood. The Human Rights movement, in turn, is paradigmatically represented by associations of « mothers », « grandmothers », « children » and « relatives » of the victims (Sondéreguer, 1989 ; Jelin 1989). On the other hand family and friendship relations are amongst the main reasons not to emigrate from a country where the correlation between educational level and income is weaker every day. I want to show then, the interactional mechanisms and discursive devices through which the alternative circuit and the New Age movement desacralize the disposition of Buenos Aires dwellers to establish relations with people they know personally and intimately and to maintain these relationships permanently, even in absence of any individual practical interest.

The Alternative Circuit and the New Age Movement in Buenos Aires

- 7 The New Age movement in Buenos Aires is based on the alternative circuit, since the latter constitutes the social network through which its message spread. The alternative circuit is a transnational network connecting individuals generally residing in urban settings and enjoying high levels of Western education. As in other cities around the globe (York, 1995), the circuit core consists of people who participate interchangeably as healers and patients, speakers and audience members, coordinators and participants, teachers and disciples, writers and readers of a vast array of spiritual, esoteric, mystical, ritual, nutritional, (psycho-)therapeutic and body movement disciplines, techniques and practices that have been generally labeled as « alternative » therapies. After their inclusion in this circuit important segments of former astrologers, tarot readers, oriental religious priests, American Indian shamans, yoga, tai-chi-chuan, meditation, body movement and art teachers begun to classify their practices as « therapies » while finding healing properties to them (Tavares, 1999 ; Carozzi, 2000).
- 8 As in the rest of the westernized world, the circuit connects in Buenos Aires different kinds of organizations, including permanent communities offering short term seminars open to the general public for a fee, centers featuring seminars and workshops coordinated by a vast array of visiting teachers, schools providing training and therapies based on a single discipline, sometimes with official representatives in different countries, centers permanently associating diverse teachers and therapies of various disciplines, sometimes linked by their country of origin ; independent healers and teachers offering services in their own offices ; specialized book and magazine press companies ; foundations organizing congresses and meetings ; and all imaginable variations and combinations of these organizational types. Books and magazines, internet sites, congresses and meetings connect locally, nationally and internationally variously defined segments of the network, but mutual referral amongst service providers and traveling healers, teachers and disciples are the main factors that turn it into a circuit. Active participants in the circuit constantly journey through centers, schools, institutions and communities both as coordinators and ordinary participants. The most famous ones journey internationally offering talks, seminars and workshops. As a consequence of the direction of cultural product distribution and differential prestige attributed to countries in the Western world, those residing in the richest countries, specially the United States of America, have more opportunities to reach wider and more geographically spread

audiences. Nevertheless some prestigious teachers and therapists from the poorest areas also travel -albeit most of the time regionally- offering pedagogical and healing services.

- 9 As it is the case for most successful movement submerged networks (Melucci, 1989), the origins of the alternative circuit preceded explicit formulation of the New Age as a movement envisaging world-wide cultural transformation. The North American origins of the circuit can be traced to bohemian communities in California -paradigmatically represented by Esalen. The breaking point that gave origin to the alternative circuit was the opening of this community, amongst other similar ones, to the general public, offering short-term seminars in exchange for a fee. Thus both commodification and circulation were inserted into the counterculture giving it a new dynamics. Together with the multiplication of human potential centers across the United States territory, also spread the practice of circulating through them in search for self-actualization. The announcement of a New Age was introduced into the circuit from England, where since the sixties a number of « light groups », paradigmatically represented by the Findhorn community, were working for the advent of a new age of spirituality. This idea was disseminated in the United States by the Universal Foundation and the conferences of Anthony Brook, who traveled the country in the late sixties and early seventies (Melton, 1992a, 1992b).
- 10 In Buenos Aires, some alternative discipline practitioners, especially humanistic and gestalt psychologists, were connected to centers of the American alternative circuit but were relatively isolated from one another before 1980. That year, Miguel Grinberg, who was also connected to the international New Age network through participation in congresses and subscription to magazines, started to build connections between them and local practitioners of natural medicine, macrobiotics, parapsychology, astrology, yoga, tai-chi-chuan and sensory awareness. Two years later, he was followed in this endeavor by Juan Carlos Kreimer. Independently, they organized magazines, informal meetings and seminars featuring international visitors. Grinberg coordinated a short-lived open university and later Kreimer organized yearly local and national new age festivals. While establishing connections between teachers, therapists and religious leaders these activists proclaimed the New Age ideal through the edition of magazines, first *Mutantia* and later *Uno Mismo*. These magazines featured conferences and articles by the American movement ideologues such as Marilyn Ferguson, Fritjof Capra, David Spangler, Theodore Roszak; reproduced articles published in American publications as *New Age*, *New Roots* and *Utopian Eyes*; reported global conferences taking place in the United States, England and Canada; and published articles by local movement activists, including the editors. In these magazines the ideas about the New Age became connected, for their Argentine readers, to the disciplines included in the alternative circuit which were both reviewed in articles and advertised by local practitioners.
- 11 Thus, local New Age activists fostered local connections amongst national practitioners who were by that time already connected to the international circuit but isolated from one another. Thereby they promoted the development of a national chapter of the international alternative circuit that was both locally and internationally connected. New Age local magazines promoted relations amongst alternative disciplines by linking them all to the same ends: self-actualization, consciousness amplification, self-healing and assisting to the advent of a new age of spirituality. Meetings featuring multiple workshops in a variety of disciplines initiated long-lasting connections amongst alternative practitioners, allowing their participation in the activities of one another and

encouraging mutual referral to their future patients and disciples. As else-where (Amaral, 1999), mutual referral constitutes one of the central mechanisms for the establishment and growth of the alternative circuit (Carozzi, 1999).

- 12 In the 1990s a growing tendency towards specialization, professionalization, and disciplinary orthodoxy, together with the abandonment of millennial hopes by most practitioners, modified the Buenos Aires chapter of the alternative circuit. This tendency appears as the reflection of an international one in the same direction, since it was observed both in Brazil (Russo, 1993 ; Tavares, 1999) and England (Bowman, 1999). Nevertheless, mutual use of therapeutic, esoteric and spiritual services and referral of patients and disciples willing to specialize in other disciplines maintained network connections. At the same time institutions offering « master degrees » in specific disciplines guaranteed by American and Eastern centers multiplied.
- 13 In 1994 the list of most popular disciplines connected by the Buenos Aires circuit included : natural healing systems (gem therapy, flower therapy, scent therapy, mud therapy, chromotherapy, hydrotherapy, etc.) ; natural food systems (macrobiotics, *anna yoga*, vegetarian cooking, etc.) ; non psychoanalytic psychotherapies (bioenergetics, Jungian psychology, Reichian psychology, Gestalt psychology, transpersonal psychology, psychodrama, body-mind alignment, play therapy, mask therapy, neuro-linguistic programming, language ontology, etc.) ; esoteric disciplines (astrology, numerology, graphology, tarot) ; oriental and alternative body movement techniques (Feldenkrais system, Alexander technique, postural alignment, grounding, harmonizing dance, eutonics, *tai chi chuan*, *yoga*, *chi kung*, etc.) ; oriental and western alternative diagnostic and therapeutic practices (homeopathy, acupuncture, *do in*, *shiatzu*, rolfing, etc.) ; meditation techniques inspired in Buddhist, Hinduist, Taoist and Christian mystic practices ; American Indian rituals (sweat lodges and shamanism) and practices derived from combinations and adaptations of diverse religious and non-religious practices (angelic therapy, *Orixa* dances, Goddess rituals, pagan European magical practices, miracle courses, etc). Courses, seminars and work-shops were also offered in almost every possible combination of the aforementioned techniques. As was the case in the international circuit, after that year, *feng-shui* and emotional intelligence training also became successively popular in the Buenos Aires chapter of the circuit.
- 14 As in the United States of America (Melton 1992a), in Buenos Aires disciplines undergo a cycle of sudden popularity immediately following their inclusion in the circuit, followed by a slow declination until they reach a common plateau². This cycle responds to the promotion of new disciplines by the American publishing industry and the reproduction of its best-sellers by local editors. Almost all circuit professionals participate in workshops of these newly promoted disciplines. The wealthiest amongst them sometimes travel to the country of origin of a newly introduced discipline in the transnational circuit. They generally do so after reading about it in New Age magazines or books translated and edited by local publishers, who are always in search of novelties for a public composed of eager consumers of new experiences. Being the first one to offer workshops or courses in Buenos Aires in any given discipline thus publicized gives a teacher or therapist more prestige within the circuit than any of their local disciples will ever enjoy. These pioneers are the most solicited by centers to offer workshops and by circuit participants to be their teachers. Thus traveling abroad and bringing to the city workshops in disciplines that are new in Buenos Aires but already incorporated to the

international circuit is both valuable in terms of prestige and profitable in terms of money earnings.

- 15 Most centers offering workshops, courses and professional training in alternative disciplines from 1990 to 1995 were located in upper-middle-class neighborhoods. Amongst them Palermo enjoyed the highest concentration of centers. This fact is probably due to the high proportion of psychologists residing there who converted to New Age ideas and adopted its practices through participation in the circuit (Carozzi, 1996).

Disembedding in the alternative circuit

- 16 For professional participants in the Buenos Aires alternative circuit their connection with the network was generally accompanied by a relaxation of long lasting ties. It also brought about their circulation among different centers -sometimes abroad- first taking courses with different teachers and classmates, and later offering their own workshops to short-lived groups. The following examples illustrate this rotation :

Ana was a housewife and mother of two children. Apart from performing household chores, she helped her husband performing administrative work for his small business. In 1978 -she was forty years old- she was diagnosed an arthritic illness that orthodox medicine declared incurable. Searching for a solution she consulted a Spanish specialist in macrobiotics who was delivering conferences in a natural medicine society in Buenos Aires. Following his advice she felt better. Since then she started to read about nutrition in the society's library and to take courses in macrobiotics, natural medicine, anna yoga and vegetarian nutrition in various naturalist centers. All she read or learned she later cooked at her home and ate. Adopting what felt good and discarding what felt awkward, she put together her own system of natural alimentation and cooking. She soon started to give courses to teach her nutrition and cooking system. A few years later she opened a health food store where she got in touch with participants in the alternative circuit. She offered workshops and published books of recipes that soon became best-sellers. At the same time she started to take courses and seminars on meditation techniques and yoga. A decade after her diagnosis she had one of the best known centers in the alternative circuit, where courses and workshops were offered not only on nutrition and cooking but also on a vast array of oriental philosophies, metaphysics and meditation techniques.

Martina was born in Buenos Aires in 1963, her father was a lawyer and her mother a school teacher. She was raised as a Catholic and decided to dedicate her life to social services. She obtained a university degree in this discipline and started to work simultaneously at a Catholic school and her neighbour-hood parish. In 1988 her mother died and a friend recommended her a shiatzu massage. She enjoyed the massage and started to take classes with that same therapist. That year she took short-term courses in masotherapy, deep massage, and practical anatomy. The center where she learned the latter discipline offered courses in sensory perception and corporal expression -which she took the following year. A class mate recommended her a bio-energetics course which was offered in a different center. She took it and she subsequently participated in workshops of hyperventilation, music therapy, psychodrama, transpersonal therapy, creative visualization, conscious gymnastics, energycenter gymnastics, tai-chi-chuan, eutonics and rolfin, coordinated by different teachers at the same center. Three years after her first massage course she left her jobs at the school and parish. Now she earns her living giving massages and offering workshops in different alternative centers.

Alicia was an English teacher born in Buenos Aires. She married young, and for fifteen years she followed her husband, who was an executive of an expanding textile company, around Argentina. They lived for two or three years in each major city of the country. She tried to open English teaching academies in more than one occasion but as soon as her business started developing her husband had to move to a different place. In 1988, she began to feel depressed and her doctors prescribed a growing number of pills. During a visit to her city of origin, a former schoolmate recommended her to visit a Bach flower therapist. After this encounter she stopped taking allopathic pills and started to use flower remedies. She decided to stay in Buenos Aires, where the couple owned a beautiful suburban house, while her husband traveled around. She took a course on Bach flower remedies and following the advice of her classmates and teachers took Feldenkrais, conscious gymnastics, health food preparation and psychological astrology courses. Two years later she started to prescribe flower remedies, and then transformed a part of her house into a center housing workshops coordinated by other teachers in all the disciplines she came in contact with.

Elisa was the only daughter of a wealthy couple. She took theater and dance classes since she was very young. When she was sixteen she read a yoga book where she learned it was possible « to stop the mind ». She asked around until she found a yoga teacher with whom she regularly practiced for the following four years. At the same time she read everything that was available on oriental philosophies. Following recommendations of classmates she visited a Sai Baba center in Buenos Aires and then traveled to India to meet him. There she learned about other ashrams and visited them. Back in Buenos Aires she frequented a zen dojo. After attending a one-week meditation workshop she attained what she considered to be illumination. Since then she started offering workshops in several Buenos Aires centers teaching her own synthesis of dance, yoga, and zen meditation. During the summers she travels taking courses in every discipline that becomes fashionable in the alternative circuit and then incorporates whatever she learns to her own workshops in Buenos Aires. In her search of personal growth she has resorted to Hindu, Chilean, Mexican and North American teachers, traveling to their countries of origin.

- 17 For all of them -as for the rest of the twenty five professional participants in the Buenos Aires alternative circuit that retold me their life histories- contact with the network was accompanied by a loosening of long lasting ties : with her family in Ana's case, with the Catholic church and her profession in the case of Martina, with her husband for Alicia, with her yoga teacher for Elisa. It also implied their circulation among different centers - sometimes abroad- first taking courses with different teachers and classmates, and later offering their own workshops, either in various centers or, if lacking them, housing subsequent teachers and disciples.
- 18 How is this disposition to move along and establish ephemeral contacts with a variety of individuals acquired through participation in activities of the alternative circuit? To answer this question I conducted participant observation following the same habits of circulation of the twenty five active participants in the Buenos Aires alternative circuit that retold me their life histories. Following recommendations of therapists, workshop coordinators and class mates, from the beginning of 1992 through the end of 1994 I attended *tai-chi-chuan* courses with three different teachers and *yoga* classes with two instructors. I frequented eutonics, dance therapy, transpersonal psychotherapy, past-lives therapy, contact with angels, language onthology and expressive vital movement workshops. I regularly consulted a Bach flower therapist and took *do-in* and *shiatzu* massages with three different professionals. Finally, I read the books and magazines that were recommended to me in the course of my participation within the circuit. In the

remainder of this paper I will examine some of the prevailing practices in Buenos Aires that tend to desacralize prolonged and significant relationships between individuals while sacralizing ephemeral contacts.

The desacralization of permanent relationships in the alternative circuit and the New Age movement

- 19 Initial participation in the alternative circuit and the New Age movement in Buenos Aires is sometimes motivated by the search for a solution to health (Albanese, 1992), psychological or social problems, a quest for mental and emotional harmony, or a pursuit of spiritual evolution (Amaral, 1999). However, the individuals who have participated within it for a prolonged period of time generally believe that these searches are one and the same. Regular participants maintain that physical health, emotional equilibrium and spiritual evolution are aspects of a single reality and are intimately related. Therefore, for them, the systematic inclusion of a given practice within the alternative circuit transforms it into a therapeutic, psychotherapeutic and spiritual experience. From my perspective, this association of certain practices concurrently with health, emotional equilibrium and spiritual development, is what awards them absolute legitimacy, sacralizing them. To the contrary, the systematic and consistent exclusion from the meetings, workshops, seminars and therapies of the circuit of certain forms of sociability which are common in other realms of culture, denies them their association with health, emotional equilibrium and spiritual development, diminishing their legitimacy and de-sacralizing them.

a. Desacralizing permanent relations through participation within the alternative circuit in Buenos Aires

- 20 The first set of practices that discourage lasting relationships in the therapeutic, pedagogic and spiritual situations organized within the alternative circuit in Buenos Aires are those that grant the alternative network its distinctiveness as a circuit. Such practices include, firstly, that most activities take the form of short workshops. This brief duration discourages more permanent bonds between individuals who attend them, as well as between participants and their teachers. Also, the habit of recommending or mentioning, in any workshop of any discipline, a large number of other disciplines included in the alternative circuit opens for any of the interested participants a large gamut of future workshops. Thus, it makes unlikely the possibility that those who participated together in a workshop continue later the same path through the circuit. And if by chance they meet in a second workshop, there another spectrum of possibilities will open and their roads will in all likelihood separate.
- 21 Separation of individuals who were once route companions also happens in other religions like Umbanda or Pentecostalism -where individuals sometimes leave a temple to join a different one or to open their own. In the case of the alternative circuit or the New Age movement, however, it occurs much faster ; sometimes in weeks, when in the case of other religions it takes months or years. Further, it is here encouraged and legitimated by the very coordinators, whereas in the other religions it is not.

- 22 The circulation of therapists and coordinators who subsequently organize activities in different centers for a percentage of their earnings, makes long-lasting relationships between therapists and patients or teachers and disciples more difficult. In this way, for example, Viviana, a forty-year-old dancer and professor of contemporary dance, told me how, after a physical injury, she was successfully treated by a *do in* practitioner who was part of the alternative circuit. For her next lesion, a year later, she had to trace him through four different telephones until she found the place where he was now working. Two years later she suffered another injury, but at this time was unable to determine his whereabouts. She decided to change him for a more orthodox kinesiologist who, even if less efficient, could always be located when needed. This example illustrates how the permanent circulation through different centers makes problematic the establishing of stable relationships between patients and healers through time.
- 23 Furthermore, « detachment » is taught in many workshops as a value to attain. There are workshops solely devoted to train participants in disengaging form permanent relationships and loyalties. People are taught, by discourses produced in many other workshops of the alternative circuit, to end, more than modify, « unhealthy relationships » and to avoid the development of permanent associations with other people.
- 24 Another set of alternative circuit practices displace elsewhere the focus of attention when the relationship between persons could be interpreted as producing a positive result. These practices contribute to make the relationship between individuals less visible when an interaction is produced within a workshop or therapeutic session in the alternative circuit. By means of their verbal definition of the situation, coordinators displace the attention of participants from the knowledge they are imparting to the body of the students and patients. While in ordinary classes of bodily techniques the teacher instructs and the students copy, in the workshops of the alternative circuit the situation is defined in such a way that both the teacher and the student are alert to what emerges directly from the body of the student. As a result of this definition of the teachers, the body of the student acquires the attributes of an autonomous agent that is the source of its own positive transformation. The body-agent appears free from the model that the teacher exemplifies.
- 25 In other occasions the focus of attention is displaced from the personal relationships established with the workshop coordinator or other participants, towards the connection of the participants with the air, flowers, gems, water or mud they are put in contact with. In this way the connection of the individual with nature -and not with other participants- is framed as healing. The definition of the air, the scents, the stones, the colors and the floral essences as natural, combined with the attribution to them of an identity that interacts with the participant, construct the relationship with nature as a force of spiritual evolution. At the same time, it displaces the focus of attention away from the relationship with the therapist, the coordinator or the other participants. Alicia expressed the resulting experience in the following manner :
- « When I found the (Bach) flowers and tried them, I felt that I did not have to do all the work by myself. It was a feeling of abundance, of saying 'Wow! There are things that can help me with this and I don't have to do everything by myself, from my own work, from my conscience. I can take these flowers'. The flowers help from the physical level, in the sense that this vibration acts on the energetic body - eliminating blockages and enabling activity- and for me it also helps at the

consciousness level, making you feel that you are not alone, that you are connected to something, that there is abundance in the universe, that there is love ».

- 26 In other workshops, the attention is displaced away from the personal relationship established with the therapist or the coordinator by defining them as « only a channel » of God or the universal energy. The situation is redefined in such a way that the patient or participant in the workshop is not relating with the facilitator, coordinator or therapist, but *through him* with the de-personalized energy of the cosmos or nature. Thus Ana describes her work as a nutrition counselor saying : « *I know I am telling the person in front of me something that she needs to know and that I am only a channel, it is not me who is saying it. I am just a channel* ».
- 27 Other frequent practices displace the focus of attention away from the relationship between persons towards an internal one that is established between different inner constitutive parts of the individual. Here the coordinators and therapists disappear from the definition of the situation that is produced in the therapeutic session or the workshop, and are replaced by a « wise » and « healthy » agent that, it is said, exists within the patient or participant, and with which he can relate to. This agent may be defined as his « higher self », his « inner teacher », his « inner shaman », his « inner energy », his « center » or his « body ». Thus, Elisa, described to me her role as a workshop coordinator with the following words: « *The body of the student will find the form it feels is more comfortable and pleasant, and it will be the best for him. When I see that people make an effort to copy what I do, I tell them 'just feel how you do it' and everything turns out better* ».
- 28 These transformations re-define the situation in such a way that if the participant in a workshop of the alternative circuit experiences more knowledge, well-being or spiritual harmony, these changes are not defined as resulting from a relationship with the therapist or his fellow participants. They are viewed as the result either of an interpersonal relationship with something within him, his higher self, his inner teacher or of a relationship with something impersonal that transcends him -the cosmos, or nature. Consequently, when the therapists and coordinators of the alternative circuit describe how they acquired their knowledge, the influence that other people could have had in their adoption of certain practices and beliefs, in their own healing or in their choice of courses and workshops, is consistently elided from their narratives. In these narratives, the transformations undergone in the past are always produced in the absence of any personal relationship. Alicia retold the beginnings of her healing from her extended depression saying : « *I started to understand that, essentially, only I could make changes in my life that would favor my recovery as a person. I believe that the Bach flowers were effective because I let them* ».
- 29 The adoption of this interpretive frame facilitates the mobility, the circulation through diverse workshops and the continuous replacement of teachers. The continuous circulation through groups and workshops is thus favored by a definition of the situation that does not recognize a role for the relationship with specific persons and groups in positive transformations. These supposedly come from an internal drive or are due to the establishment of a relationship with an impersonal whole -the cosmos or nature. In the words of Elisa : « *I feel that teachers are like arrows that indicate a direction. Thus, for me they were always these arrows that pointed a direction, but not the end itself. This is why I never became attached to any one teaching or teacher...* ».

- 30 The habit of continuously circulating between ephemeral groups is not only explicitly encouraged within the alternative circuit but also attributed to the functioning of the healthy body. The flux of energy is often presented as cause and sign of health and balance, while the hindrances to this flow are considered cause of sickness and imbalance. In the course of an interview on her practice Martina argued : « *With massages, you achieve a contact through which the person may sometimes reconstitute herself, because he/she has parts that are lost, because he/she has blockages and with massage you achieve a flow. The person may thus find the totality of his/herself, because we are part of a universe, of nature, we are part of a whole, I feel it that way* ».
- 31 Thus, the continuous circulation between ephemeral and changing groups is not only encouraged, but also naturalized as a quality of the healthy human body.

b. Desacralizing permanent relations through reading the published discourse of New Age activists in Buenos Aires

- 32 The magazines and small newspapers that advertise the activities of the alternative circuit in Buenos Aires feature in their pages not only articles, but also advertisements, of numerous centers where many disciplines are taught. This diversity within a single publication also encourages the divergence of the paths of individuals participating within the network, educating them about options previously unknown to them, and thus further discouraging stable relationships between workshop colleagues as well as between them and the organizers.
- 33 Published texts discourage permanent bonds between individuals, not only within the circuit but also in the social relationships established outside of it, sacralizing instead the habit of permanently circulating between short-lived groups by considering it « healthy » or optimum. Thus, the most famous astrologist of the Buenos Aires network writes in *Uno Mismo*, the main media vehicle of the alternative circuit and the New Age movement in Buenos Aires since the end of the 1980s :
- « And the vital modification of consciousness in Aquarius is an identity one ; you are as much as you participate in, not as much as you belong to. For many, the loss of belonging engenders resistance, neurosis, and panic attacks. But since Taurus overflows by accumulation change arrives inevitably... » (Eugenio Carutti, « *The unpredictable Aquarius* », *Uno Mismo*, 198, December 1999, p. 101).
- 34 In the published discourse of the activists of the New Age movement in Buenos Aires, the absence of identification with, and loyalty to, stable groups is also presented as an answer to collective problems. A 1989 editorial of the magazine *Uno Mismo* written by Juan Carlos Kreimer, a journalist who directed the magazine and also coordinated bioenergetics, inner-self writing and new masculinity workshops, stated :
- « The present state of affairs grants the opportunity for everybody, majorities and minorities, to work upon the vicious circle of polarization. Democracy allows us to periodically review the relation between promises and accomplishment: if there is no adequate match, the voter withdraws its vote, even from the party of his soul. (...) We do not vote in an automatic manner anymore. Perhaps this re-nourishing is the best way to avoid military coups » (Uno Mismo, editorial, June 1989, p. 72).
- 35 If detachment is sacralized through its association with health and the solution of collective problems, the formation of stable groups that imply permanent relationships and loyalties is frequently demonized, in the discourse of the activists of the New Age movement. The identification with stable groups appears frequently in this discourse as a

cause of the problems that affect humanity, as illustrated in the following statement by Miguel Grinberg, published in his magazine *Mutantia* :

« The human being shows that he is as vulnerable to the hypnotic quality of slogans as he is to contagion by infectious diseases. The individual is not a murderer, but the group is, and by identifying with it the individual becomes one. This is the diabolical dialectics that is palpable in the human history of wars, persecutions and genocides » (*Miguel Grinberg, « A revolution of the hearts », Mutantia, 6/3, p. 15*).

- 36 *Cosmicization* constitutes a powerful legitimization mechanism for certain models of social relations. Through it, arbitrary forms of interaction are attributed to the functioning of the universe (Carozzi, 2000). The habit of continuously circulating between ephemeral groups is not only explicitly encouraged within the alternative circuit but also attributed to the functioning of the cosmos in Buenos Aires New Age publications. Another article in *Uno Mismo* magazine, stated :

« In all the universe, from the most imperceptible microorganism to the most remote galaxy (...) everything flows, connects, moves along and disappears to give birth to new harmonies and novel combinations » (*« Sharpen the presence », Uno Mismo magazine, 198, p. 6, December 1999*).

- 37 The habit of establishing permanent connections with always changing individuals and groups is thereby translated into a discourse of « flowing ». The universe is frequently described as constituted by « energy that flows ». Thus, the continuous circulation between ephemeral and changing groups is converted not into a mere social practice but into a quality of the universe.

Conclusions

- 38 A vast array of practices and discourses of the alternative therapeutic circuit and the New Age movement in Buenos Aires discourage and de-emphasize permanent personal relationships within and outside the network by framing them (Goffman, 1974) as the source of unhealthy or unbalancing personal or collective situations. Concurrently, ephemeral relationships are naturalized, cosmicized and, like the relationships that the individual establishes with himself and with the cosmos and nature, associated to health, well being and spiritual development. From these findings, we can conclude that the habitual practices within the local chapter of this transnational circuit, as well as the discourse of the activists of the New Age movement, contribute to the processing of the culture of educated, middle class Buenos Aires dwellers in a definite direction. They de-sacralize lasting and significant personal relationships, associating instead intra-personal relationships, and individual relationships with nature or the cosmos to positive spiritual and social transformations.
- 39 Miguez (2000) has suggested that Pentecostalism and the New Age movement provide a religious or spiritual correlate -for the lower classes and for the educated, urban, middle ones respectively- to the processes of disembedding that characterize Western society in late modernity. The processes of disembedding would lift out individuals from their relationships with those who share their same space and time and put them in contact with others spatially and temporally distant (Giddens, 2001).
- 40 This interpretation seemed paradoxical since the New Age and the alternative circuit bestow, as several authors have pointed out, a central importance to face-to-face interactions and encounters as well as to therapies that imply massages and bodily

contact, in the achievement of spiritual development and well-being. Thus, the type of disembedding that the alternative circuit contributes to legitimate is not originated in an emphasis on mediated social relationships but in the continuously changing character of the human beings with whom interaction is established, in the incessant circulation between always changing groups and through geographically extended circuits. Ephemeral contact with new protagonists and even across national boundaries seems to be the key of disembedding within the alternative circuit and the New Age movement - more so than the mediatization of relationships that the development of communication technologies makes possible.

- 41 The New Age disembedding does not seem to be based, then, in the suppression of the importance of face-to-face relationships, but in the continuous mobility of individuals. A disembedding that is not only correlated with the expansion of the publishing industry - which has its clearest spiritual correlate in classical Protestantism- but with the mass expansion and cheapening of means of transportation. The massiveness of the mobility of individuals in the world has made possible not only the mobility of ideas or systems of thought, but also the mobility of systems of movement and bodily contact. Thus, shiatzu, tai-chi-chuan, yoga, do-in, reiki, sweat lodges, the circular rituals of Native Americans expand throughout the Western world, de-territorializing, losing their original meanings and acquiring counter-cultural ones for those educated in the Western system (Amaral, 1999).
- 42 The easiness of this transfer seems to correspond with the disposition that allows the active participants of the therapeutic alternative circuit to be at the same time continuously meeting in face-to-face encounters and continuously disembedded. And they are not disembedded because they establish mediated relationships but because by being in continuous movement, the face-to-face relationships they establish are always ephemeral, of limited significance, changing and geographically mobile. They are not disconnected from their immediate social surroundings, but others continuously replace the people who dwell in these proximate settings. The New Age movement grants sacrality to this disposition to the continuous replacement of social interlocutors associating it with spiritual growth, health, evolution, harmony and the resolution of collective problems.

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NOTES

1. In a previous article (Carozzi, 1999) I have argued that this transformation in organizational form -from church or sect to network- mirrors, in the religious realm, the transformation that new social movements introduced *vis-à-vis* old ones.
2. As an exception, yoga, astrology and flower therapies enjoy a high and stable degree of popularity.

ABSTRACTS

The article describes a set of practices and discourses of the alternative therapeutic circuit and the New Age movement in Buenos Aires that discourage and de-emphasize permanent personal relationships by framing them as the source of unhealthy or unbalancing personal or collective situations. Concurrently, ephemeral social relationships, intra-personal relationships and relations with the cosmos and nature are shown to be associated to health, well being and spiritual development. Based on these findings, it argues that both the habitual practices within the local chapter of this transnational circuit and the discourse of the activists of the New Age movement contribute to the transformation of the culture of educated, middle class Argentines by de-sacralizing lasting and significant personal relationships. It concludes that ephemeral contact with ever-changing protagonists -even across national boundaries- seems to be the key of disembedding within the alternative circuit and the New Age movement, more so than the mediatization of relationships that the development of communication technologies make possible.

L'article décrit une série de pratiques et de discours du circuit des thérapies alternatives et du mouvement du New Age à Buenos Aires qui découragent et tendent à faire régresser les relations

personnelles permanentes en les stigmatisant comme sources des situations malsaines ou déséquilibrées, tant sur le plan personnel que collectif. Simultanément, les relations sociales éphémères et les relations avec le cosmos et la nature sont présentées comme associées à la santé, au bien-être et au développement spirituel. À partir de ces constatations, l'article démontre que tant les pratiques habituelles des associations locales de ce circuit transnational que le discours des leaders d'opinion du mouvement du New Age contribuent à la transformation de la culture des Argentins instruits de la classe moyenne, par la désacralisation des relations personnelles durables et significatives. Il conclut que le contact éphémère avec des protagonistes continuellement changeants – même au-delà des frontières nationales – semble être la clef de ce « désancrage » au sein du circuit alternatif et du mouvement New Age, bien plus que la médiatisation de relations rendue possible grâce au développement des technologies de la communication.

INDEX

Mots-clés: désancrage, New Age, thérapies alternatives, transnationalisation

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